

Creating a Climate of High Expectations for Student Learning

SIRC

THE KEY TO SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

CREATING A CLIMATE OF HIGH EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENT LEARNING

NCLB GUIDELINES

Under the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, schools must show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in making sure that **all** students achieve academic proficiency. As a result, schools must examine all factors that contribute to students' academic success or failure, including school culture. A high performing learning culture is a requisite for students' academic success. The focus of this planning guide is to provide suggestions for supporting a positive change in the school culture and climate.

DEFINITION OF SCHOOL CULTURE AND CLIMATE

"School culture and climate refers to the sum of the values, cultures, safety practices, and organizational structures within a school that cause it to function and react in particular ways. Some schools are said to have a nurturing environment that recognizes children and treats them as individuals; others may have the feel of authoritarian structures where rules are strictly enforced and hierarchical control is strong. Teaching practices, diversity, and the relationships among administrators, teachers, parents, and students contribute to school climate. Although the two terms are somewhat interchangeable, school climate refers mostly to the school's effects on students, while school culture refers more to the way teachers and other staff members work together."

(McBrien & Brant, 1997, p. 89)

Source: McBrien, J.L., and R. S. Brandt (1997). *The language of learning: A guide to education terms*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

DISTRICT IMPLICATIONS

In order to meet the minimum AYP requirements in reading and mathematics, districts must offer targeted support to individual campuses in their efforts to reform the campus culture. Some initial considerations include:

- Establish a Climate of High Expectations
- Provide a safe and orderly learning environment
- Send the most skilled teachers to the campuses that need to establish a more positive learning environment
- Provide coaches or mentors for principals
- Set goals and show increments of success by sharing the raw data with schools
- Require the use of data to drive all systems on a campus
- Provide follow-up checklists and support to ensure implementation of new systems
- Develop a team consisting of district and campus personnel to establish a process to coordinate improvement efforts on the campus
- Establish a system of support and accountability for campus leadership

STRATEGIC STEPS FOR A CAMPUS

Identify existing core values and beliefs.

To begin the process of change, identify the core values and beliefs that pervade the campus. Examine the extent to which the campus culture, climate, and structure are guided by the core values and beliefs. Utilize “Best Practice Research” to critically analyze and establish a system of beliefs and values.

Questions to consider:
1. Do teachers and staff members believe all students can learn?
2. Do teachers believe they can make a difference in the academic success of each student?
3. Is student learning “The Most Important Thing”?
4. Do teachers and staff members understand how students learn?
5. Do staff members model the concept of life-long learning?
6. Are staff members properly trained, and do they participate in on-going professional development?
7. How is leadership structured within the school? Is it important for teachers, parents, and students to have a role in the decision-making process and to participate in a system of two-way communication?
8. Do teachers see value in collaborating with and learning from one another?
9. Are parents active and welcome on campus?
10. Does the school possess a “no excuses” attitude toward teaching and learning?

Establish a vision and mission for the campus.

It is important to establish a vision for the campus that is aligned to the school’s core values and beliefs. As the campus leader, the principal must diligently work to continually communicate his/her vision for the school. Collaboratively establish a mission for the campus. Encourage the faculty to examine their own beliefs and how their beliefs align with the campus vision and mission.

Activities:
1. Become familiar with the district’s mission and vision. Ensure that the school’s values and belief systems are aligned to that mission and vision.
2. Create a mental image of what you envision the school and students accomplishing and/or becoming. Communicate that vision.
3. Post the school’s mission in a variety of locations for everyone to view.
4. Develop a short phrase that captures the essence of the mission/vision; utilize that phrase on school stationery, the school’s marquee, newsletters, community handouts, and student, faculty and parent handbooks.

5. Ensure that staff members can articulate the mission/vision. Create opportunities for staff members to share the mission/vision with a variety of constituents including students and parents.
6. Continually refer to the mission and vision statements as well as the collaboratively developed school goals at all faculty, departmental and other building level meetings. Develop a visual graphic to utilize when referring to these statements.
7. Identify staff members who do not share the school's beliefs, values, mission and/or vision. Individually work with these staff members helping them to identify their roles in the school improvement process.

Secure a learning environment.

Safety is the most important aspect of a campus community. The principal must examine safety and security to ensure that the school is focused on learning and all conditions are aligned with that goal.

Questions to consider:

1. Is there a school-wide discipline policy outlining actions, rewards, and possible consequences?
2. Do teachers have adequate classroom management and organizational skills?
3. Do teachers and students know and understand the expectations for behavior?
4. Are the classroom environment and the instructional practices conducive to student learning?
5. Is the responsibility for student behavior shared by teachers and staff members?
6. Are there policies and procedures for tardies and absences?
7. Are there policies and procedures for student movement and behavior during transition periods, before school, and after school?
8. Is the communication process with parents regarding student misbehavior appropriate and effective?

Model

The campus leader must model the core beliefs that support the campus vision.

Activities:

1. Establish a system of shared campus leadership utilizing the campus leadership team, department chairs, and other faculty leaders.
2. Establish guidelines, rules and procedures to manage all campus activities. Place these in writing and provide a copy to each member of the campus community. Ensure that all members of the campus community are aware of and understand the systems and processes that have been established. All guidelines, rules and procedures should be aligned to "The Most Important Thing", which is student learning.

The campus leader must model the core beliefs that support the campus vision.

Activities: Model <i>(continued)</i>
3. Organize time in a manner that sends a clear message that student learning is “The Most Important Thing”. Place priority on classroom visits, attend grade level and department instructional planning meetings, meet with teachers regarding instruction and the use of data, talk to students and parents regarding academics, as well as conduct visible planning sessions for instructional improvement.
4. Develop the ability to speak the language of learning and instruction with teachers. Stay current with “Best Practices”. Attend and participate with teachers in the various content specific staff developments that are offered.
5. Attend all Admission Review & Dismissal (ARD) and Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) meetings.
6. Work to create an environment that is clean and aesthetically pleasing.

Exercise instructional leadership.

Focus on the language of learning, instruction, and success to raise expectations for teachers and students. Permeate the campus with talk of goal setting, data, growth, and achievement.

Activities:
1. Use all opportunities to create a common language of learning and instruction among staff. Regularly discuss student learning and success at faculty meetings, department meetings, grade level meetings, in weekly newsletters, e-mail messages, and brief meetings in the hallway or lounge.
2. Display graphs and posters to chart student growth at all levels - classrooms, grade levels, school wide - to prompt discussion between teachers, students, and administration.
3. Change the vocabulary used in the school community. Focus on being exemplary, not acceptable. Focus on student learning, not passing. Focus on commended performance, not met expectations.
4. Conduct conversations with teachers regarding individual student and classroom data as well as a plan of interventions or instructional adjustments needed based upon the data.
5. Teach teachers to identify students who are in need of assistance and how to devise a plan for assisting these students.
6. Conduct conversations with students and parents regarding their individual student data, goal setting, and goal attainment.

Communicate high expectations.

Research has proven that establishing high expectations for all stakeholders will result in higher student achievement.

Activities:
1. Establish a “No Failure” attitude with staff, students, and parents.
2. Establish policies and procedures that protect instructional time.
3. Hold teachers accountable for student learning.
4. Establish policies that emphasize to students the importance of academic achievement.
5. Utilize slogans that communicate high expectations for both academic and behavioral achievement.
6. Develop an environment that will create the student expectation of seeking additional schooling even after the high school years.
7. Model and communicate to students that learning is a life-long process.

Emphasize high level offerings.

Raise expectations of teachers, parents, and students by offering more rigorous courses and focusing on high levels of learning for every student.

Activities:
1. Create opportunities for students to take Advanced Placement (AP) classes.
2. Focus on the number of students passing AP classes rather than simply focusing on the number of students taking those classes.
3. Implement a program that emphasizes student achievement, such as AVID, International Baccalaureate, Spanish AP Classes for Native Speakers, or other college core curricula.
4. Provide gifted & talented (GT) and limited English proficiency (LEP) teaching strategies to all content area teachers, and then check for classroom implementation of those strategies.
5. Evaluate current GT and AP Identification processes. Update these processes in a manner that will accommodate the identification of all diversity groups.
6. Publicize information about high-level classes so that the information is easily accessible to parents and the community.

Create effective classrooms.

One of the main roles of the principal is to ensure that all classrooms have a positive, purposeful atmosphere, where students and teachers feel valued and work together in a supportive and safe environment.

Activities:
1. Does class start on time? Are administrative details handled in an orderly fashion? Is all available time appropriately utilized for student learning?
2. Is the classroom orderly, appealing, and physically arranged in a manner that will create an atmosphere that is conducive to learning?
3. Do teachers have the physical supplies necessary to ensure student learning?
4. Are teachers' classroom management practices effective in keeping students on task?
5. Do teachers utilize a variety of instructional strategies and approaches to address the broad range of learning styles and multiple intelligences?
6. Are students instructionally engaged and appropriately challenged?
7. Is the classroom instruction "student-centered" or "teacher-centered"?
8. Are grading practices based on a variety of activities that monitor student learning?
9. Do teachers infuse multicultural content throughout the curriculum?
10. Do teachers possess the instructional skills necessary for effective classroom instruction? Or is targeted and specific professional development needed?
11. Do teachers take responsibility for student success by continuing to motivate students to build responsibility and ownership for learning?

Implement interventions and support.

Construct circumstances that support student success and make all the adults accountable for student success

Activities:
1. Create a plan to ensure that teachers in each subject area are available before and/or after school for tutoring/homework help for all students. Ensure that students know the schedule for tutoring/homework help.
2. Open the library and computer labs to students and to parents at various times before, during, and after the school day.
3. Provide students with daily planners that teach organizational skills.

4. Encourage teachers to physically post and display learning objectives and expected outcomes of the day.
5. Require teachers to create a “homework” center within the classroom where students can obtain information regarding classroom work and assignments on their own whenever they have been absent.
6. Create a school-wide pyramid of interventions for all students that activates automatically at various levels whenever a student begins to fail or continues to fail. Interventions may include: parent notification, individual conference, pass to tutoring during the day, assigned to a student mentor, required tutoring, counseling, academic contract, and/or observing the student in class.

Celebrate success.

It is critical to praise and honor those who achieve their goals and exemplify the core values of the campus.

Activities:

1. Celebrate benchmark successes frequently.
2. Celebrate student group growth from multiple perspectives - classroom, grade level, department, and school-wide.
3. Celebrate and recognize individual student and teacher successes.
4. Recognize acts of responsibility, kindness, integrity, and other such traits.
5. Recognize innovations in teaching.
6. Create and celebrate opportunities for academic competition for all students.
7. Reward academic and behavioral success with special programs, privileges, and other incentives. Develop the incentives on a three, six, or nine-week basis so that students have an opportunity to start over to gain success.
8. Reinforce to students the long lasting rewards of receiving an education.

Involve parents.

The participation of parents in a regular, two-way, meaningful communication involving student academic learning is essential to creating a climate of high expectations for student learning.

Activities:
1. Recruit parents to work in the school as volunteers and tutors.
2. Communicate with parents on a regular basis via e-mail, newsletter, etc.
3. Ensure that it is easy for parents to find out how their children are doing academically.
4. Encourage staff members to call or write notes to parents celebrating successes.
5. Ensure that parents have an easy avenue to be informed of and understand what their children must do and know for assigned homework.
6. Create and support an active parent/teacher organization.
7. Provide an educational component for the parent community, such as GED or higher learning opportunities, language acquisition, anger management, cyber safety, household budgeting, health services, job placement or community college hours.
8. Recruit business/community partners to work with and in the school.
9. Recognize volunteers for their efforts.